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## Get the drift

### Kahuku is the front line of battle for volunteer beach cleaners at war with the Great Pacific Garbage Patch

By Nina Wu

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Nov 28, 2011

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Suzanne Frazer and Dean Otsuki, co-founders of BEACH (Beach Environmental Awareness Campaign Hawaii) clean the shoreline fronting the Campbell Wildlife Refuge in Kahuku.



At first glance it looks like a disaster hit the shoreline.

Scattered along Oahu's Kahuku shore is a mess of plastic crate pieces, buckets, ocean buoys, toothbrush handles, rope remnants and oddball pieces like a rubber fin, a car bumper and golf balls.

But the mess isn't the result of a hurricane, shipwreck or other calamity; it's the longtime buildup of marine debris washed ashore from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch resulting from human-generated litter in the ocean.

Suzanne Frazer and Dean Otsuki, founders of the nonprofit Beach Environmental Awareness Campaign Hawaii (BEACH), often get asked when the Great Pacific Garbage Patch will hit Hawaii's shores.

"This is the Great Pacific Garbage Patch," said Frazer, gesturing toward the Kahuku beach debris on a recent November morning. "This is it."

The floating patch of marine debris is often reported to be roughly the size of Texas and comprises mostly broken-down pieces of plastic. It swirls around in the North Pacific Gyre, a vortex of ocean currents between Hawaii and California.

Because of the way the currents flow, much of it is landing on Hawaii's coasts, and Kahuku's shoreline is getting the brunt of it.

This remote shoreline about 1.8 miles east of Turtle Bay Resort is closed off to the public. Monk seals visit with their pups, and Hawaiian green sea turtles nest in pockets there.

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With permission from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which owns and manages the land, BEACH has been bringing volunteers to clean up the coastline since 2008. The Honolulu nonprofit focuses on cleaning marine debris from Hawaii's shorelines and educating the public about the issue.

The debris washes in at high tide, and even though volunteers clean it up every other week, more arrives on a regular basis. The task isn't as simple as "picking up trash." It involves dealing with several layers of litter that vary in size from huge to gravel-size.

Among the regular finds are bottle caps, bottles with Asian markings, straws, rope, oyster separators, an occasional sand toy and fishing floats.

Those types of items can be picked up by hand and gathered in buckets for disposal. But clear away the driftwood, and even tougher to get at are the tiny, gravel-size pieces of plastic embedded in the sand or clogging tide pools.

For these, BEACH volunteers sweep the debris into a custom-made sand sifter or scoop them up with fishnets to separate them out.

The heaviest items are large ropes caught in the rocks. These can weigh 1,000 pounds or more. Volunteers disentangle them, haul them off the shore and drop them off at Pier 38 in Honolulu for a federal "nets to energy" program that burns the ropes at the city's HPOWER plant.

WHILE BEACH is engaged in a constant battle to clean the debris from Hawaii's shorelines (it cleans other beaches as well, focusing on the most affected ones), there's also the impending arrival of potentially radioactive tsunami debris from Japan's March 11 disaster. That debris is expected to invade Hawaii's shores in a couple of years, according to University of Hawaii researchers.

Frazer said her group is trying to clean as much of the shoreline as possible before that happens.

"The more stuff that can be removed now will help," she said. "When that tsunami (debris) hits, it will hit a cleaner beach and not layers and layers and piles of stuff."

BEACH volunteers are also sorting and weighing the debris to get an idea of what and how much is washing ashore. There is no accurate estimate thus far, according to Carey Morishige, Pacific islands regional coordinator for the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration, though an aerial survey in 2008 showed that most derelict fishing gear washes up on Oahu's Windward side.

On average, BEACH hauls out more than 1,000 pounds of trash on each visit, not including the heavier nets. Frazer estimates about 40,000 pounds of trash has been hauled out since the group began cleaning up Kahuku in 2008.

They are particularly interested in keeping track of the number of nurdles, industrial pellets that resemble BB pellets and are used to produce plastic bottles. They spill into the ocean during shipping to manufacturing plants.

Birds, fish and turtles mistake tiny plastic pieces and nurdles for food.

While a debris-littered shoreline doesn't make a pretty postcard picture, the nonprofit's concerns have to do with the health of the ocean, which affects marine life as well as humans.

"Life on Earth depends on a healthy ocean, and somebody had to do something about this quickly," Frazer said. "We couldn't just leave it as it is. The whole food chain is affected by plastic and the chemicals in plastic. ... This is very serious."

Next month BEACH will talk to Kahuku High School students about marine debris and invite them to help clean up the shoreline.

Last year the organization sent marine debris it collected to Stockholm-based Electrolux, which made vacuum cleaners out of the recycled plastic to raise awareness of the issue. This year BEACH is sending the marine debris to a fashion designer in Brazil who will use it to make a dress.


While it is disheartening to return to a shoreline covered with debris just after having cleaned it up a few weeks earlier, Frazer and Otsuki say they have seen some progress.


Back in 2008 the area 130 feet back from shore was also carpeted in marine debris. Now there are still bits and pieces scattered among the naupaka, but it's not as voluminous. Also, as community members became aware of the problem, they started helping with the efforts.


"The reduction effort is visible," Frazer said. "Kailua Beach has improved since a huge cleanup in 2006. At Makapuu we collected 3,000 pounds in one cleanup. What happened after all those cleanups is the community got involved."

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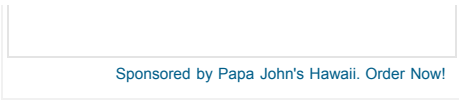


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